Employment of Occupational Therapists in Nontraditional Settings

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Nontraditional occupational therapy can be defined as what is done by an occupational therapist beyond the clinic walls of a hospital, rehabilitation center, or school. What the occupational therapist does in such nontraditional employment settings is usually not direct service and may not even be identified as occupational therapy in the formal job description. Rather, the position can be something that uses an occupational therapist’s skills, training, and expertise. Such nontraditional settings as local, state, and federal governments; sales and marketing firms; private industries; and professional associations may all employ occupational therapists. An occupational therapist, for example, may help define and execute policy within government; promote sales of equipment or materials in business; develop habilitation programs for industry; or serve as a lobbyist for a professional association.

Much of an experienced occupational therapist’s skills and abilities are transferable to other jobs in nontraditional settings. These marketable skills are (a) responsivity, (b) reasoned judgment, (c) recognition of priorities, (d) realism, and (e) rapport.

Responsivity

Occupational therapists have a tendency toward field dependency; that is, we are sensitive and responsive to our environment and the people in it. We know how to read verbal and nonverbal cues, because the execution of any worthy treatment program requires responsivity to clients and their needs.

Much of the work in business, industry, and government is conducted in groups (e.g., task forces, advisory committees, consultant groups). By perceiving what individuals within the group are doing (independent of what they are saying) as well as perceiving what the group itself is doing (independent of the group mission), one can work well in groups. The group skills training that all therapists receive is invaluable, and an experienced occupational therapist brings more developed group skills to the work setting than do most professionals.

Additionally, we as therapists get along well with almost any type of person because we are trained to read verbal and nonverbal cues and to be sensitive to a person’s needs. The ability to get along with others and to be affable and socially adept in work settings is a valuable skill. Thus, social skills and strength in interpersonal relationships based on responsivity are skills that many employers would appreciate.

Reasoned Judgment

Occupational therapists make daily decisions requiring reasoned judgment that affect the lives of clients. Therapists are accountable to clients, supervisors, and
third-party payers for their decisions regarding treatment of choice, duration of treatment, and home programs. Thus, experienced occupational therapists have considerable skill in making and explaining reasoned judgments. Reasoned judgments consist of professionally based decisions for which no textbook, scientific paper, or expert can give precise answers—It is a decision or judgment the individual must make based on the synthesis of available information and past experience.

The ability to execute and justify reasoned judgments can be restated as a commonsense approach to problem identification and problem solving. The ability to justify and explain one’s opinions and plan of action is valuable in a nontraditional setting, especially to one’s supervisors.

Recognition of Priorities

Occupational therapists set priorities for every testing situation, treatment plan, and treatment session. In the process, they come to accept that not everything can be done and prioritize their work. Many people in nontraditional settings feel burned out because they are unable to prioritize their work. By trying to do it all, they miss important deadlines and feel exhausted and frustrated. But the person who can set priorities brings a real strength to any administrative or management position.

Within the framework of priority setting, flexibility is fundamental. Just as all occupational therapists have considerable experience in setting priorities (e.g., in a treatment program), they also have experience in changing their priorities when an unanticipated event occurs (e.g., the sudden divorce of the parents of a pediatric client). The unanticipated event changes and requires an immediate reordering of the priorities. Thus, priority setting can be a flexible and dynamic process. By working with many different types of clients and problems, occupational therapists have learned to expect the unexpected. The ability to set and reorder priorities as the situation dictates are high-level management skills crucial to task management.

Realism

One cannot set priorities without a realistic understanding of the situation at hand. Occupational therapists must continually and realistically assess a client’s status, progress, and potential. Few of us expect perfection from others, because we understand realistic expectations in terms of function and ability. We are experienced in estimating realistic work loads and task performances for others. We cannot work successfully with clients in their homes, at work, and in social settings without having a realistic understanding of these environments. Thus, occupational therapists have experience working in reality (Fields, 1956). They do not ask “What if?” but rather “What can be accomplished realistically?”

Employees who possess an understanding of what they or others can realistically accomplish, given the available resources, time, and ability, are valued, because this allows for successful plans of action. Thus, possessing realistic viewpoints, or realism, is a valuable skill that occupational therapists can offer employers in nontraditional settings.

Rapport

The hallmark of a successful client–therapist relationship is the establishment of rapport. Occupational therapists are trained in the importance of developing rapport with clients. This ability is also important to the success of a manager in any setting. Successful professionals are usually those who can easily establish rapport with all of the office employees, including janitors, secretaries, and professional staff, because they are best able to motivate others to produce results.

Summary

From my personal experience as a therapist employed in a nontraditional setting, I have identified the skills and abilities of experienced occupational therapists that are germane to work in nontraditional settings or beyond the clinic walls. Our profession can benefit from therapists working in nontraditional settings by gaining recognition and influencing decision makers in ways that will benefit the clientele that occupational therapists serve.

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Reference